

Transforming ODL through Online Collaboration: The Hidden Curriculum

Sub-theme: Transformation through research

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Abstract

This paper will describe how research on online interactions led to the development of a Collaborative Online Learning (COL) Model at Open University Malaysia (OUM). The model aimed to improve the quality of learning and to develop a set of skills required of graduates today for a K-society. The model also reinforces the development of skills such as analytical, problem-solving, communication and ICT literacy as well as being able to use the latest information technologies to conduct research, identify relevant resources, select the right information, analyse and make presentations, share resources, collaborate and become team players. This “hidden curriculum” is realized through learner engagement in online discussions among course mates. In the discussions, they would be contributing opinions, suggestions, ideas, information based on research while working collaboratively as a team on a particular course-related assignment. The latter could be a specific task, problem, scenario or case study. The paper will also describe an ongoing research on the gradual implementation of the COL model over several semesters.

Introduction

The Open University Malaysia has been regarded as one of Malaysia's fastest growing universities in terms of student population. As the country's seventh private university and first open distance learning institution, OUM has grown exponentially. More than 31,000 students have enrolled over the last four years. It has 33 learning centres spread throughout the nation, hence reaching out to the working adult population found in the smaller cities or remote areas. As a relatively young university, its blended approach to learning has worked rather well. This comprises online forums, face-to-face tutorials and self-managed learning through printed modules, electronic courseware and use of the digital collection provided by the university library.

OUM has identified online collaborative learning to be an essential part of the learning process. Also referred to as threaded discussions, this method has the potential to be effective as it promotes constructivist learning, the latter often advocated as being the most suitable for adult learners. OUM allocates five percent of the course assessment to be awarded to active and successful participation of students in the online discussions.

Recently, following a series of evaluations of the online student and tutor interactions, a model for Collaborative Online Learning (COL) to support an interactive curriculum was developed. Defined as an online interactive process, it is necessary for learners and their tutor to work together to achieve a common goal (Kuldip and Zoraini, 2004). Previous to COL, online discussions were managed as best as tutors could. They were asked to provide a learning issue for discussion by their learners. While some tutors were able to do so, many were not able to formulate an appropriate task that would engage learners in collaborative learning in the way that it is believed to be. It should not only be an interactive but also a recursive process that encourages individuals to support each other in attaining learning outcomes.

As other scholars have asserted, the online discourse drives learners to work on a project, to do research or develop a relationship that is "spontaneous, voluntary, development oriented and pervasive across time and space" (Sandholtz, Ringstaff & Dwyer, 1997, p. 119). As Schmuck & Schmuck (2001) recommended, learners should be encouraged to work together as part of a larger system rather than as individuals. In addition, Kirkpatrick (2001) indicated that in collaborative learning situations as students work together, they maximize their own and others' learning. Learners are actively engaged in the process. It is believed that collaborative online learning can better prepare students for today's increasingly globalized world. Kirkpatrick further pointed out that effective use of collaborative online learning should enable learners to acquire complex and higher-level concepts and skills. Online collaborative activities can be developed to engage students in interacting with each other. Through this engaged interaction, students would be learning from each other and develop substantive content knowledge and skills.

Research on online forums at OUM

Prior to the development and implementation of the COL model, OUM's compulsory participation in the online discussion forums has been the main motivating factor for learners to post messages online. They do this through OUM's Learning Management System called myLMS. In a study among 68 out of about 450 tutors in early 2003, it was found that most (95.6 percent) tutors reported that they understood the process of online forum discussions (Abas & Abtar, 2004). In addition, 96.6 percent of the tutors surveyed believe that online forum discussions play an important role in learning among adult open distance learners at OUM.

In an effort to ascertain the type and nature of postings in the online forums, it was found that learners depend on the tutor to help answer their questions online. This can be deduced from the pattern, with regard to frequency of postings to the group and tutor as well as postings in response to their peers (see Table 1). The majority, that is, 69.2% of the tutors reported that learners were not posting messages to the group. And, 61.2% of the tutors indicated that the learners were not active in replying to postings from their peers. Instead, most postings from the learners were directed to the tutor. This was reported by 67.8% of the tutors who returned the questionnaire.

Table 1

Perception of Tutors on Students' Postings in the Online Discussion Forums

Items	Strongly Disagree N (%)	Disagree N (%)	Agree N (%)	Strongly Agree N (%)
1. I noticed that most students are active in sending postings to the group (N=65)	10 (15.4)	35 (53.8)	17 (26.2)	3 (4.62)
2. I noticed that all students are active in replying to postings from their peers (N=67)	11 (16.4)	30 (44.8)	22 (32.8)	4 (6)
3. Most postings are directed to the tutor (N=62)	1 (1.6)	19 (30.6)	35 (56.5)	7 (11.3)

In follow-up study to determine the effectiveness of online discussion forums for collaborative learning, Abtar, Harvinder and Rames (2004) found that most of the OUM tutors answered questions posted by learners without supporting knowledge building among learners. The same was observed when a randomized check of online forum postings was carried out in early 2004. Most postings were typically, the learner asking the tutor a question related to the content, assignment or test and the tutor answering the

learner. The main benefit for the rest of the forum group members is that they will be able to view the “question and answer” session. Interactive discussions over the subject matter that were participated by several students were rare. In the first two years since OUM took in its first batch of students, it was agreed that learners went into the online discussion forums because the five percent marks were important to them.

Realizing the Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum is potentially a significant means of achieving learning outcomes that are not achievable through the formal delivery of curriculum content. The hidden curriculum can prepare the student for membership in society (Dreeben, 1968), prepare students for the mastery of non-academic skills in order to become model students (Webb and Sherman, 1989) or it could help shape students’ skills, beliefs and attitudes towards work (Wren, 1999).

It is common knowledge that many Malaysian university graduates lack some of the pertinent skills necessary to function in today’s workplace. And, as the nation moves towards the new economy, graduates need to have a set of skills to function in a K-society. This includes skills such as:

- analytical,
- problem-solving,
- communication,
- ICT literacy,
- information literacy (i.e. being able to use the latest information technologies to conduct research, identify relevant resources, select the right information, analyse and make presentations).

Furthermore, it is also important for workers to have the right set of attitudes and this includes:

- sharing resources,
- being able to collaborate, and
- being a team player

At OUM, it is believed that these are attributes that could be achieved through the “hidden curriculum” via learner engagement in online discussions largely among their course mates and at times, with their tutor. The objective for the implementation of the COL environment at OUM is achieving most if not all of the above.

The Collaborative Online Learning Environment

The goal of collaborative online learning at OUM is to build an interactive learning community among learners whose discussions will lead to the achievement of specific

learning goals that will supplement and complement their other learning activities. COL was designed to develop some of the skills required of graduates today for a K-society, as listed in the previous section. The “hidden curriculum” was set into action via the design of the group activity and it is realized through learner engagement in the online discussions that are structured in the form of learning tasks provided at the beginning of the semester. Initially tested with two courses in May and September, 2004, respectively, COL has also been implemented in seven courses last January 2005. The group activity based on a learning task that is related to the course assignment was written by the Subject-Matter Expert with the help of two COL Project Leaders. Today, COL has benefited over 8,000 learners from nine different courses from each of the six academic departments at OUM.

The OUM COL Model

For online learning to benefit learners, everyone must know what is expected and how they can each benefit. In the COL model (see Figure 1) learners are given a content-specific activity for discussion online for a certain period of time. Learners will be involved in several learning processes: discussion, explanation, justification, sharing of information and resources, analysis and problem-solving.



Figure 1. The Model for Collaborative Online Learning

The four components of the model are: **General Forum**, **Academic Forum**, **Shared Responsibility** and **Common Goals**. The **General Forum** allows learners to post questions and responses to their tutor or to their peers. This forum is meant for exchange of information on non-content related matters such as schedules, deadlines and learning resources. The **Academic Forum** is focused on the content-specific activity such as the assignment and tasks for formative assessment. The crucial difference between the two is that the former may not be directly moderated by the tutor but by the learners themselves.

The latter is more structured and will require the tutor's presence on a regular basis and quality moderation is essential.

Shared Responsibility refers to commitment from three parties: OUM, tutor and learner. Each has a significant role to play. While OUM is responsible for providing the means for online discussions and the understanding of content, the tutor is accountable for guiding and providing constructive feedback to learners. The learners are responsible for his or her own learning and are expected to contribute to the discussions by citing examples, discussing details, responding to each others' ideas by agreeing or disagreeing and sharing knowledge and resources that are related to the tasks.

The implementation of the model will not be effective unless the three parties share **Common Goals** toward the learning outcomes. This sense of common goals is the basis for providing a collaborative virtual learning environment, as well as the utilization of the communication channel (myLMS E-Learning platform) by the teaching-learning community.

Learning Tasks for COL

Learners are asked to participate in an online learning activity in the form of a learning task or assignment for COL at the beginning of the semester. Examples of learning tasks are activities related to: case studies, research projects, problem-based tasks, scenario analyses and critical analyses of situations.

As Kirkpatrick (2001) aptly pointed out, collaborative learning tasks should be designed to encourage learners to work together and help each other towards achieving common goals. It is not enough for students to share materials or to discuss ideas. The tasks need to be structured in such a way that learners will be accountable for their own learning and for contributing to the completion of the group activity.

In a course called *English for Workplace Communication*, the task entails the learner to critically examine a situation at the workplace. The task was structured as follows:

You are the Human Resource Manager of Dreamakers Sdn. Bhd. During a management meeting in your company a year ago, it was proposed that all future training courses should be held in-house, and that employees will no longer be sent away for training. It was also agreed that all in-house courses should be delivered through the Internet, and an Online Training Department was set up for this purposed. The proposal was implemented and for a whole year, the evaluation committee raised the following issues:

- a. Many employees registered for online training courses but only 30 percent completed the modules and received a Certificate of Completion.*

- b. There was a lack of participation in courses that required online participation. It was found that many employees accessed the online discussion rooms, but did not post quality ideas or present their opinions on important issues.*

After a series of discussions in the online forums, learners were expected to:

- a. Employ critical thinking skills to analyse and find plausible explanations for the scenario described
- b. Provide feedback to peers' ideas/opinions and to share information and resources
- c. Collaborate to provide solutions to address the issues stated in the evaluation committee's report
- d. Write a report, an executive summary and a cover letter consistent with the (format) requirements of the workplace.

Based on feedback collected from learners of the workplace course, it can be concluded that the task had successfully resulted in enhanced learning among the online participants. Learners were observed to have shared information, discussed and debated on some of the issues and were seen to have functioned, in most cases, as a team, thus contributing to each other's learning experiences. Some of the comments received from learners at the end of the course were as follows:

The discussion helped me a lot in the form of information and ideas.

Yes, the online discussion helped a lot since we're meeting (for tutorials) only three times this semester. The online discussion filled in the gap. I used the ideas posted by friends together with mine to complete the assignment.

I was able to discuss more issues and got feedback for my ideas as well.

I was able to access the online discussion forum seamlessly and fellow comrades contributed creative and outstanding ideas.

The discussion is just to get an idea on how to start the assignment not to complete the assignment.

Before this semester, my online discussion was not as active. So I am happy . . . and it encourages me to continue.

Assessment of COL Activities

There have been several suggestions on how to evaluate online discussions using a set of recommended rubrics. In the COL environment at OUM, learners are awarded marks based on the rubrics given in Table 2. The evaluation of learners' postings are based on the frequency as well as the quality of their contributions. While a maximum of three marks are given to quality of postings, a maximum of two marks are awarded to frequent postings.

Table 2

Assessment of COL Postings

Category	Description	Marks
Frequency of Contributions	Contributions have been regular and varied without long lapses between postings	2
	Learner has been present online but postings have been few and far between; student has been a lurker more than an active contributor	1
	Learner is rarely or never present online	0
Quality of Contributions	High quality contributions focused on task; strong evidence of learner having generated discussion, analysed information, drawn conclusions and helped create a lively debate	3
	Contributions have been focused on the task; some evidence of analysis, sharing and teamwork	2
	Contributions have been minimal with little evidence of sharing and teamwork	1
	Few or no contributions have been made toward the discussion or task	0
TOTAL		

Effectiveness of COL and the Future

Through the COL discussions at OUM, learners have been observed or reported to be contributing opinions, suggestions, ideas, and sharing information based on research while working collaboratively as a team on a particular course-related assignment. As one tutor reported, with the COL task, he found that students were more critical in their

thinking and realized that the quality of postings by learners were better with the COL task. He further expressed that COL has contributed to better quality assignments.

On whether tutors can cope with COL, the tutor's response was as follows: "Well I found this to be very much easier. In fact all the answers are provided by the students themselves. Tutors act as facilitators. Most of my responses are very short and what I do is I will try my level best to motivate each and every individual in the online discussion." He has next suggested that OUM maintains this COL activity (Abas, 2005).

When asked on the difference that COL has made on the course, the same tutor said, "I found this to be the best approach. It has indirectly motivated the students to participate actively in the forums, unlike before, whereby students hardly communicated with their peers and tutors."

When first introduced to the idea of creating a collaborative learning environment, it was expected that online forums among learners and between learners and the tutor will comprise discussions at a higher cognitive level. Tasks created for the COL environment has managed to achieve this to some extent, depending on how well-structured the tasks have been. Nevertheless, learning has been enhanced through COL and objectives of the hidden curriculum are being achieved.

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